

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

March 24, 2010

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U.S. Envoy Urges Israel, Palestinians to Show Restraint

By Luis Ramirez
VOA News

Jerusalem — U.S. special envoy George Mitchell met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the Jordanian capital, Amman, and urged both sides to create the conditions necessary for a new set of negotiations.

"On behalf of the United States and the president, I urge all sides to exercise restraint," said Mitchell. "What is needed now is a period of calm and quiet in which we can go forward in the effort in which we are engaged."

The region has seen a new wave of violence in recent days, with clashes erupting between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli police in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. In the past few days, several Palestinians have been killed in the confrontations.

U.S. efforts to bring both sides back to the table have been further complicated by a diplomatic rift between Israel and Washington, after Israel announced its approval of 1,600 new housing units to be built in East Jerusalem.

At talks with Mitchell in Amman, Abbas indicated the Palestinians have still not decided whether to return to negotiations.

Abbas said the Palestinians are waiting for an answer in the coming few days and they hope this answer will include acceptance of a statement by the Quartet of world powers mediating the conflict that urges Israel to freeze all settlement activity.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat condemned Israel's continued expansion of settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

"Our positions are very well clear-cut, defined," said Erekat. "We need to give proximity talks the chance they deserve, but we want to make sure that the decision of the Israeli government to construct 1,600 housing units in East Jerusalem and more to come is really stopped."

Mitchell later met with Jordan's King Abdullah II. A palace statement said the monarch told the U.S. envoy that Israel must stop all unilateral measures in the occupied Palestinian territories, and what it described as provocative moves aimed at changing Jerusalem's identity.

The proximity talks mediated by the United States are meant to lay groundwork for future direct negotiations. Both sides suspended talks more than a year ago.

Peace Corps Promotes Health via Mobile Phone

Program in Namibia uses text messaging for health information
By Jim Fisher-Thompson
Staff Writer

Washington - The Peace Corps, the United States' premier overseas volunteer agency, is using mobile phones to reach, train and inform health care workers in Africa.

"A top priority for me as director of the Peace Corps is to create new ways to harness the innovation and creativity of our volunteers to further Peace Corps' impact and project sustainability," and that includes more mobile phone messaging, Aaron Williams told America.gov.

"Volunteers in the 21st century who come to the Peace Corps are technologically savvy with more [electronic] gear and knowledge than we could ever give them," Williams added. "We're running to catch up with them."

A case in point, he said, is health education software developed by two volunteers in Namibia — Rashid Khan and Jennifer Moore — using the mobile phone-based short messaging service (SMS), also known as text messaging, to communicate on issues such as HIV/AIDS and family planning.

Khan recently described how the program operates on a mobile technology Web site: "We are working in Namibia with three organizations using a modified version of PlaySMS we've dubbed HERSMS that implements a round-robin style of forwarding messages that aren't handled by keywords to a pool of volunteers who can then respond to the query and have it relayed back to the client." He added: "We use the system to create dialogues, support-line style, between volunteers and clients about sexual health topics. The software tracks keywords in the conversations and associates them with themes, which are then graphed."

Work on health and HIV/AIDS — a major focus for the 7,600 volunteers who have dedicated two years of their lives to living and working in 76 countries — represents 18 percent of all Peace Corps volunteer jobs.

In Namibia, where 1,150 volunteers have served since the country achieved independence in 1990, many of the 134 current volunteers use the SMS program while teaching information and communication technology (ICT) techniques in conjunction with other subjects such as English and mathematics. They also run community activities for their students, such as libraries and computer labs, boys' and girls' clubs, HIV/AIDS clubs, and computer classes for students, teachers and community members.

In education, which accounts for 33 percent of the Peace Corps' volunteers, ICT is also increasingly important as a tool to expand learning opportunities through the use of radio, video and computers, according to a Peace Corps document. ICT not only broadens access to education but "makes learning more interactive, provides teachers with access to classroom materials, and enables classrooms around the world to communicate and collaborate," it said.

Director Williams said in a recent speech that when the Namibian SMS program was launched in 2009, "volunteers sent out over 1,000 unique health-related messages in one month. Peace Corps volunteers serving in other countries heard of the success and requested the program's model for their communities.

"This one innovative idea in Africa [where more than 3,000 volunteers, or 41percent of the total Corps, serve] has spread to posts in Asia and South America in a matter of months," he said.

But he hastened to add that "technology alone is not a cure-all" for underdevelopment. "It needs to be partnered with brains, generosity and compassion. Alone it won't alleviate poverty, fight the spread of HIV/AIDS or increase access to education overnight, but it is an area where our volunteers' creativity and imagination is inspiring."

The Peace Corps was established in 1961 by President John F Kennedy. His call to service was echoed by President Obama, who recently presided over the largest budgetary expansion of the volunteer organization in its history. During almost 50 years, 200,000 Americans have served in the Peace Corps in 139 countries.

Williams, who was sworn in as the Peace Corps' 18th director in August 2009, is a former volunteer who served in the Dominican Republic from 1967 to 1970. He later joined the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), where he served for 22 years and ran the USAID mission in South Africa. He is the second African American and the fourth returned volunteer to head the agency.

Nations Pledge Billions for Forests

One-fifth of carbon emissions caused by deforestation

By Karin Rives
Staff Writer

Washington — Armed with \$4.5 billion in new funding pledges, world leaders are beginning to tackle a major contributor to climate change: deforestation.

In mid-March, representatives from more than 60 nations met in Paris for the International Conference on the Major

Forest Basins to begin to develop a global plan to implement REDD — the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation program. It was the first follow-up to the Copenhagen climate summit in late 2009, and the 10 countries leading the effort say they will have a REDD plan completed for the United Nations climate meeting in Mexico in December.

Under the program, dubbed REDD-plus, developed countries would pay developing countries to protect their trees. If implemented, it could become a cornerstone of the international effort to save tropical rain forests and other woodlands that are now disappearing at an alarming rate.

Agriculture, logging and other human activities are eliminating millions of hectares of forest a year, and each felled tree releases carbon dioxide into the air. While countries such as Brazil have managed to slow the destruction, it's estimated that one-fifth of carbon emissions (PDF, 40KB) today come from deforestation.

As negotiators forge an international REDD strategy, corporations, nongovernmental organizations and government agencies are already working hard to stem forest destruction in vulnerable regions.

Helping their cause is a fledgling commodities market for carbon dioxide offsets, credits that countries, companies and individuals buy under carbon-trading programs to compensate for their own emissions. The payments from these credits give local landowners an economic incentive to preserve, rather than cut, their trees.

If REDD is implemented and the United States moves forward with legislation that would cap greenhouse gas emissions and allow industry to purchase forest carbon offsets to meet emissions targets, the impact would be huge, said Don Melnick, a conservation professor and forestry expert at Columbia University in New York City.

He is advising a group called the Amazon Forest Carbon Partnership that is working with local environmental trust funds in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru to establish the best practices for future so-called "avoided deforestation carbon credits." This is in anticipation of a growing demand for forest preservation projects in the years ahead.

"There are a lot of people right now doing the groundwork for developing the market and getting everything in place," Melnick said.

USAID RAMPING UP FOREST PROJECTS

At the same time, government programs are spending more time and resources to help developing countries

slow their tree consumption. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, has a number of forestry and forest conservation projects under way that are making a difference in local communities and ecosystems worldwide.

Since the Copenhagen climate summit in December 2009, however, the agency has been refocusing some of its work to prepare regions for U.N.-led REDD projects. Equipped with more than \$74 million earmarked this year for climate change-related forest investments, USAID will be working with the World Bank on new activities such as accounting and verification of greenhouse gases, and REDD-plus “market readiness.”

Several ongoing or recently completed projects in the USAID portfolio include a partnership between USAID/Kenya and Clean Air Action Corporation to work with 40,000 small farms to plant trees and gain access to potential carbon markets. USAID is also working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to improve forest-focused greenhouse gas inventories in developing countries.

Such initiatives come in addition to traditional tree-conservation activities such as the 70,000 indigenous shade trees the agency recently planted in Cote D’Ivoire, and the 2.4 million hectares of biologically significant forest it helped place under management by timber companies committed to sustainable forestry in Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Environmental activists welcome the growing commitment to forest projects, but note that the estimated price tag for reducing deforestation, at several billion U.S. dollars annually, requires a much bigger investment by leading nations.

“Everybody looks to the U.S. as the world’s largest economy and biggest footprint, and there’s a lot we can do as Americans,” said Bruce Cabarle, the forest carbon program director at the World Wildlife Fund. “The question is, is [what we do now] enough to address the global challenge of climate change? Is it commensurate with the need and challenge that we face?”

(Preceding items distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://america.gov>)